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WASHINGTON (CNN) -- The chairman of the House Veterans Committee blasted the Veterans Affairs Department on Tuesday, accusing the agency of criminal failure to respond to evidence of rising suicide rates among former soldiers.

"This is a matter of life and death," said Chairman and Democratic Rep. Bob Filner, of California, "and I think there was criminal negligence in the way this was handled."

In a follow-up hearing on the veteran suicide issue, Filner insisted that the VA has either ignored critical suicide data or covered up the numbers.

"The pattern is deny, deny, deny," Filner told Veterans Secretary Jim Peake, "then when facts seemingly come to disagree with the denial, you cover up, cover up, cover up."

The committee was reacting to a December hearing in which Ira Katz, the VA's chief for mental health, insisted that suicide data reported in the media had been exaggerated.

Three days after his testimony, Filner said, the agency indicated some alarming statistics could, in fact, be correct.

Anger was evident across the hearing room Tuesday.

"That's not just an insult to me, it's an insult to me and our veterans," said Rep. Harry Mitchell, a Democrat from Arizona.

Mitchell was particularly irate at what he sees as stonewalling by the VA. He said he has spent four months requesting specifics on what resources the agency needs to handle the suicide issue.

He was told to file a Freedom of Information Act request, a method more commonly reserved for the public and media, not congressional committee members, he said.

"I've tried to be reasonable," Mitchell told the committee, "I've tried to work with Secretary Peake's office, but Mr. Chairman, my patience is at an end."

Mitchell told Peake that if he does not receive the documents by Friday, he will push for a committee subpoena.

In the past, Peake has denied that the agency suppressed or ignored key suicide records.